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DECORATING THE HOME.

BY W. F. P.

If people would live less barren lives—if they would indulge themselves more fully in the true sense of the word Home—and remember that the house is the Sanctum Sanctorum of their affections—perhaps the house would look less like a bric-a-brac shop. It seems, however, that when an average American arrives at a state of opulence and buys or builds a house he feels that it must be decorated by a professional decorator, who is, in other words, a financial broker, dealing in works of art. The result is that he drifts into a shop that presents the broadest expanse of plate-glass and falls into the hands of the man who “does” the spick and span houses that one finds in this town;—every house alike except perhaps in color; and since the span of primary color is limited to three we find little or no scope even in this line. Thus the broker buys the decoration for this house and the furniture, like so much junk, or merchandise, or pig iron, if you will, and very much in the same manner and indeed with as much intelligence as he does his shoes. When the house is finished it betrays not the slightest trace of the individuality of the owner since he has been unable to impart any ideas of his own; his house looks exactly like a slice from a decorator’s store.

Decoration is full of curious possibilities, being at the same time the most antique as well as the newest of the arts. It is indeed the most susceptible of adaptation and quite subject to change according to the conditions under which it is accepted.

There has recently come to my attention an instance of some interest on this subject which shows, however, that it is money that talks and that the man who is endeavoring to lead intending purchasers in the right way is not always recompensed.

This is not a parable: A certain rich man who had always been rich but lived in the country his entire life, with occasional flights to some of our over-decorated hotels and restaurants, suddenly became possessed with the idea that he must have his home decorated like the rooms of an up-to-date caravansary, regardless of propriety. He learned of the clerk of the hotel the names of the various firms who did the decorative work in the hotel, and found that each one was perfectly willing to submit sketches for every room in the house. He consented to four firms doing as they had offered. The result was the greatest diversity of opinions as to what should be done for the general decoration of the rooms; one firm suggesting a Renaissance dining room, an Empire drawing room, a Louis XV reception room, an Adams music room, and so on. Please picture for yourselves an American, a simple countrywoman, receiving her country friends in a country house, in a room decorated *à la Louis XV*. What would Louis XV himself say if he could stop pushing clouds for a minute, and take a peep? Fortunately for them the intending customers became so bewildered with the mass of evidence presented to them that they were forced to ask advice, and still more fortunately the advice was sought in the right channels, with the result that they found themselves in the hands of a man who was an advisory architectural decorator, not the sort who has goods for sale, but the kind who had been to Paris, the fountain head of art and artists for the education that would fit him for the work of artist-architect.

In France one finds two professions of the architect—the decorative architect and the constructive architect—with this relative standing professionally: That they never venture upon one another’s territory. The decorative architect being primarily the artist who collaborates with the constructive architect, or is more often sought out in consequence of his

reputation as being an adviser to prospective clients, the man who simply gives the ideas: the creator, who has nothing to sell and who works on a fixed percentage basis and is employed to work out in an esthetic and practical manner ideas or suggestions of the client. It is he who realizes that the foremost mission of art is to decorate.

But in this country the architect controls the decoration and the entire job—the decorator as well as the mason—simply because the field of the decorative architect has been neglected or has been in a few obscure instances filled by constructive architects who happened to have the opportunity or bent for decorating, but who were lacking in any specific training for decorations or practical knowledge for building furniture. I know that this is not the land where dreams are made and that we are living in a hustling age, therefore my contention is timely that the constructive architect be relieved of that branch of his profession into which he has been forced but for which he is not qualified. By choice he took up the handling of iron, beams and brick, doubtless because he felt unqualified to venture into the field of the artist.

As a result of this union of two professions we find much the same conditions as referred to in the case of the country client; for architects pursue the same tactics in the decoration of houses. They ask three or four firms of decorators, without regard to their qualifications or standing, to submit their ideas for the decorations of the rooms of a house; and then, when all the schemes have been handed in, the architect feels the pulse of the client as to which set of sketches should be accepted, and very often taking the good ideas from each of the competitors he places all these final decisions in the hands of some decorator on the list. Most of the decorative firms of this city have runners to chase after architects, who sit in the offices of the architects by the hour in the hope of getting a set of plans upon which to figure or to submit sketches, which sketches have done service on many similar occasions, very often being sketches of ready-made or stock articles. Now, I say, why should this all be so, if the decorator were a self-respecting sort of a citizen, a man qualified by experience to do good work? Why should he not wait in his office as a professional man, and allow his work to do the running for him?

There are many student-painters whose work shows great decorative quality. Why do they not qualify themselves as decorators? Why do they not take up the practical side of the work, study the construction of furniture along with painting, and establish the profession of decorative architect of which so many of our European contemporaries have been proud? Then our homes will be homes properly decorated and furnished, not papered and over-furnished as most of them are in this day.

Therefore, to have a successful house decoration care should be taken to choose a man who is primarily an artist, so that the color will be full and well balanced, and one who can do it architecturally to avoid the dry-goods or upholstery atmosphere to which the self-styled decorators lend themselves. Then the whole will have in it the presence of the truly decorative quality which will determine its right to consideration.

It is noticeable that an architect charges a commission of only 5 per cent. to build and 20 per cent. to decorate. I wish to ask why is this? Perhaps you would like me to answer—it is because the architect recognizes that it takes a superior knowledge to do the interior work.

Ten portraits in water-color by Elizabeth Gowdy Baker, on exhibition at the Knoedler Galleries, are well worth seeing. The medium is used in a manner which gives the depth and solidity of oil painting. It is very serious work, effectively executed. The portrait of Mrs. James A. Stillman is especially pleasing.